

Universal School Readiness Requires Universal Access

With a \$2 billion budget surplus and a ranking in state pre-K access that continually lags other states, there is no better time to make the necessary investments to reach Minnesota's own stated goal that all children are school-ready at kindergarten entry.

Based on current levels of school readiness and decades of research, only a system that provides universal access to highly effective programs can achieve this goal.

The best available evidence is that only 60 percent of Minnesota children from middle-income families begin kindergarten school-ready compared to 40 percent for children in low-income families. Dramatic increases in proficiency are needed for all children, not just low-income children. This basic fact has been widely ignored in commentaries and in policy debates. Even more sobering is that no more than half of middle-income children are proficient readers on the 4th grade national benchmark. This surely must be addressed in the broadest way possible by the state.

A narrowly targeted approach using school readiness grants and scholarships cannot mathematically achieve Minnesota's universal school readiness goal. With 40 percent of young children residing in low-income families, the overall rate of school readiness would increase to only 70 percent even if these targeted approaches led to 100 percent of low-income children school-ready.

Affordability is another neglected issue that impacts both low- and middle-income families. Minnesota has one of the highest costs of child care and early education in the nation, often exceeding the cost of college. With a median family income of \$58,000, a large percentage of middle- and low-income families cannot afford high-quality programs, especially given that the most effective programs also cost more. Minnesota's Early Learning Council has recognized the importance of serving all families in its guiding principle: "We will reach across systems, cultures, and geography to provide equal access...for all children and families, especially our most vulnerable..."

A critical mass of research showing beneficial effects of broadly implemented and universal access programs demonstrates that Minnesota will gain from a larger and more ambitious approach to pre-K. In the past five years, state and local pre-K programs in Maryland, North Carolina, New Jersey, Georgia, Michigan, Massachusetts, and Oklahoma show significant gains in school readiness across the economic spectrum without sacrifices to quality or to benefits for the economically disadvantaged. A just-released 3rd grade follow-up of the Tulsa universal access program showed no differences in achievement gains between low-income and middle-income students.

A universal access system can also promote broader changes. My own experience in school and community collaborations show that opening full-day or part-day pre-K in public schools accelerates school improvement that also benefits the community. By reducing school mobility, school-family partnerships are more likely to take hold while also fostering engagement in the community.

The most important factor in achieving high levels of school readiness is the effectiveness of the programs in producing good outcomes for children. Key elements are certified teachers who are compensated well, small classes, engaging instruction and professional learning, the provision of comprehensive services, and a built-in structure that provides continuity to kindergarten and the early grades. These are all characteristics of school-based programs but community-based programs can certainly replicate this effectiveness.

It is often stated that preschool programs yield an economic return of \$7 per dollar invested, which is equivalent to an 18 percent annual return. The primary evidence for this is my own study of the school-based Child-Parent Centers, which are currently being expanded in Minnesota. In Saint Paul, for example, we have found that highly effective pre-K produces gains in literacy that are 40 percent larger than “4-Star” rated programs. Levels of parental involvement in school also increased three-fold.

But such a return is only possible for programs that far exceed “4 Stars” on the Parent Aware Rating system. There is no evidence that low-income or middle-income families have adequate and affordable access to such programs. A universal access system will help establish the necessary foundation that not only promotes school readiness but strengthens later school success.

--

Arthur J. Reynolds is Professor in the Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota, and Director of the Midwest Child-Parent Center Expansion Project. His cost-benefit analysis of the Child-Parent Centers showing a \$7 dollar return per dollar was a major research justification for President Obama’s Preschool for All Initiative.